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ABSTRACT

This concept paper proposes a set of curriculum issues for inclusion in the emerging research agenda on professional education. The focus of the proposed recommendations is upon the interface between professional practice and professional education. A formal theory is set forth of professional practice that emerged from a substantive grounded theory study on the nature of educational practice in hospitals. This formal theory is related to a view of curriculum which is relevant to education for professions according to theories on reflective practice. A set of implications for research in professional education is suggested. First is the need for a systematic examination of the extent to which a formal theory of practice fits within the scholarly tradition of a wide range of professions. A second avenue of inquiry is the implications of the formal theory of professional practice for the planning, development, implementation and evaluation of curriculum in professional education. A third avenue encompasses questions related to the structure and process of professional education curricula. A fourth area is an examination of modes of learning and instruction. Finally, the issue of evaluating and certifying competence is pointed out as a major concern of educators in the professions. (JD)

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A Theory of Professional Practice:
Implications for Research in Professions Education

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March 4, 1988

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, the leadership of Division I has been exploring the need for a research agenda on professions education. The purpose this concept paper is to propose a set of curriculum issues for inclusion in the emerging agenda. The ideas I want to propose have been evolving slowly over the past ten years. They began in 1978 when I entered the field of hospital-based education as a novice practitioner. They continued to grow as I joined a conceptual dissertation study group and conducted my doctoral research on the nature of educational practice in hospitals. The ideas began to solidify two years ago as I read Schon's work (1983, 1987) on reflective practice, and as I prepared a set of teaching materials on curriculum development for the health professions (Piantanida, 1986, 1987). My purpose in writing this paper is not to present a research report. Rather, it is to suggest some lines of inquiry which I hope other members of Division I might find exciting and productive to pursue. I am encouraged in this hope by the comments with which Kennedy (1987) concludes her insightful essay on expertise and professions education:

> Despite the enduring nature of these questions about expertise and how it is acquired, and despite the practical need for a deeper understanding of it, there has been very little empirical research on the nature of professional expertise or on the implications of its nature for its acquisition. One result of this lack of research is that the relationship between professional education programs and professional expertise continues to be far from understood, and continues to be the subject of much debate. Without more serious inquiry into these matters, even those corners of the puzzle that could be resolved will remain elusive. (pp. 160-161)

This interface between professional practice and professional education is precisely the issue upon which my proposed recommendations for the research agenda focus. In establishing the rationale for my recommendations, I set forth a formal theory of professional practice that emerged from a substantive grounded theory study on the nature of educational practice in hospitals. Next I relate this formal theory to a view of curriculum which seems particularly relevant to professions education a la Schon's notion of reflective practice. I conclude by drawing a set of implications for research in professions education.

THE THEORY GENERATING PROCESS

As mentioned above, this paper takes as its point of departure a formal theory of professional practice which emerged from a substantive grounded theory. One of the difficulties in presenting the formal theory is the

procedural ambiguity for this level of theory building. Glaser (1978), speaking for himself and Strauss, readily admits this difficulty:

> We are far more humble when it comes to generating formal theory. We remain convinced that it should be grounded, but are not sure yet, as with grounded substantive theory, of the resolutions to many specfic problems of generation. (p. 142)

At the heart of grounded theory inquiry is a disciplined and rigorous process of generating concepts from the artifacts of human experience. Through the analysis, comparison and synthesis of concepts, the researcher then develops a language to capture and convey the meaning of those experiences to others. Inherent in the theorizing process is a striving towards increasingly higher levels of abstraction, a condition which leads Glaser and Strauss (1967) to comment:

> Since substantive theory is grounded in research on one particular substantive area. . ., it might be taken to apply only to that specific area. A theory at such a conceptual level, however, may have important general implications and relevance, and become almost automatically a springboard or stepping stone to the development of a grounded formal theory. (p. 79)

Glaser and Strauss' springboard metaphor accurately depicts the process by which I generated the formal theory of professional practice presented in this paper. When I began my study of educational practice in hospitals, I was not sure I would be able to generate a theory. In fact, I did not really understand what it meant to do grounded theory research. Fortunately, however, I was able to join a dissertation study group created specifically for the purpose of helping doctoral candidates learn about qualitative research methods. The net effect of joining this group was to focus my attention not only on the practice of hospital education, but also on my role as a researcher. In essence, I was simultaneously functioning as a reflective practitioner and a reflective researcher. Figure 1 is meant to illustrate these two layers of reflection.

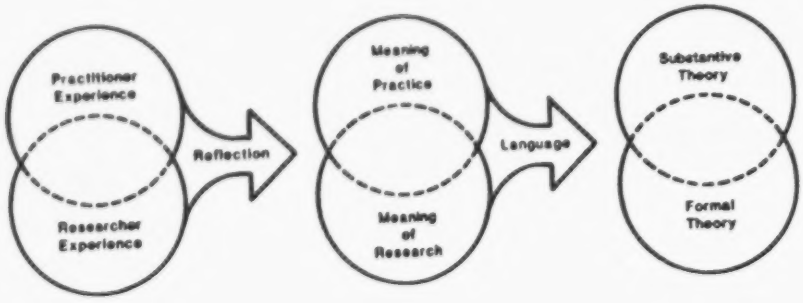

Fig. 1. Reflective Practice-Research

Before describing the theory of professional practice, I would like to briefly retrace the steps in this practice-based, reflective research experience that brought me to the edge of the springboard and enabled me to make the leap from substantive to formal theory.

Generating a Substantive Theory of Practice: In the spring of 1978, I entered the world of hospitals as a Resident of Education at a large, urban, teaching hospital. Patterned after the model of a medical residency, the position had been established to give doctoral level students in the field of education an intensive, practice-oriented learning experience. One of my goals in accepting the Residency was to complete my dissertation on some facet of hospital based education. However, as soon as I stepped through the doors of the hospital and felt myself sinking into a quagmire of confusing and often contradictory impressions, ideas and expectations. In my struggle to make sense of this overwhelming experience, I read the literature on hospital education, spoke with educators in other hospitals, and spent hours talking with key personnel in my own organization. None of these efforts helped me to gain a broad enough perspective to understand what it meant to be an educator practicing in a hospital setting. The literature on this newly emerging professional role was sparse, difficult to locate and generally not research based. Each of my colleagues seemed to have a different set of job responsibilties and different views of how things should be done. Out of this disorienting experience came my decision to do a grounded theory research project on the nature of educational practice in hospitals from the perspective of directors of educational departments.

Using interviews with directors of education as my primary method of data collection and using qualitative content analysis as the procedure for generating data, I soon found myself immersed in reams of computer printouts with neatly coded concepts. Unfortunately, everything I tried to write about these concepts seemed incredibly superficial and banal. My confidence in my capacity to generate a theory of practice was reaching an all time low ebb, when I attended a meeting of the research study group. As I listened to another member of the group describe her struggle to interpret her data, I suddenly had the image of gathering colorful pebbles from a variety of beaches. With this image came an insight--just as pebbles can be used to create a mosaic, I could use my data to create a picture of educational practice in hospitals. With this realization, I was finally able to understand the significance of Kelly's (1970) definition of theory:

> [A theory] . . .is not a collection of information regardless of how carefully catalogued it may be. Nor is it an account of a sequence of events, no matter how well authenticated. In essence a theory is simply a way of highlighting events so they may be viewed in some kind of perspective. (p. 260)

At that point, I was able to stop my pointless fussing to sort my data into neat piles and to begin the painstaking work of constructing a theory. To clarify the broad outline of the mosaic I wanted to create, I turned to the literature on the nature of professional practice and synthesized the following definition:

> Practice involves deliberate, purposeful action leading toward the accomplishment of some desired end(s). Inherent in the notion of <u>purposeful</u> <u>action</u> is the idea that practitioners operate within a framework which helps them to understand the conditions in which they work, decide what constitutes desirable ends and formulate deliberate courses of action. (Piantanida, 1982, p. 38)

With this definition in mind, I was able to identify three major clusters of data--each dealing with conditions of concern to directors of education. These

conditions were related to the purpose, the structuring, and the financing of education. The data also pointed to another, more fundamental theme related to the directors' efforts to stabilize and integrate the educational function into their organization. This, I realized, was the overall desired end towards which directors of education worked. Using this perspective, directors could analyze a multitude of conditions or forces within a hospital as well as alternative courses of action to determine whether they were enhancing or undermining the stability of the educational function. Figure 2a is meant to illustrate an organization in which the education function is unstable and marginally connected; Figure 2b illustrates an organization in which education is fairly stable and well integrated.

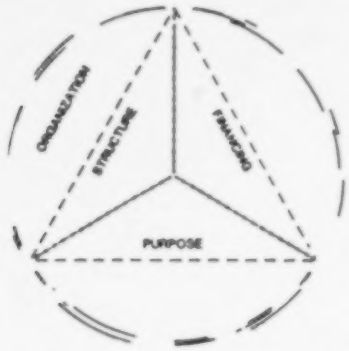

Fig. 2a. Unstable Condition

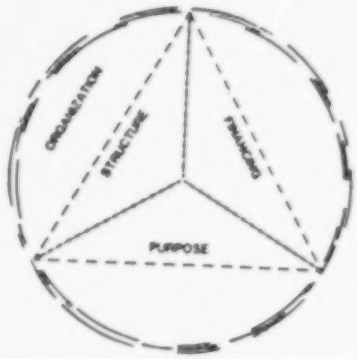

Fig. 2b. Stable Condition

As I looked at these images, another metaphor began to haunt me--the metaphor of a constantly spinning kaleidoscope. Returning to my data, I realized that the dimensions of education (its purpose, structure and financing) remain constant over time, but the specific conditions related to these dimensions are continually in flux. Both the parameters of education and the organization are continually expanding and contracting, changing in permeability and shifting in their degree of cohesiveness. My data indicated that directors of education varied in their capacity to perceive and, in turn, deal with the complexity, multiplictiy and fluidity of the conditions within which they practice. Responses to the conditions of practice suggested a continuum (Figure 3) ranging from paralysis and denial on one end to mediation and transcendence on the other:

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Paralysis	Denial	Oversimplification	Compartmentalization	Mediation	Transcendence

Fig. 3. Continuum of Responses to the Conditions of Complexity, Multiplicity and Fluidity

Competent practitioners of hospital based education recognize the complexity, multiplicity and fluidity of the conditions within which they work; generate strategies that enable them to monitor changing conditions; and formulate courses of action which keep are responsive to current conditions, yet contribute to the overall aim of maintaining education as an integral part of the organization. Skillful practitioners do not force fit kaleidoscopic conditions into predetermined solutions; they create solutions appropriate for

the conditions at hand.

Having put hospital based education into this perspective, I felt my mosaic, my substantive theory of practice, was complete. Yet, it still seemed as though I had something more to say. Two thoughts kept nagging at me. First, what I had said about practitioners of hospital education seemed as though it would be relevant to practitioners in other professions. Second, because of my involvement in the dissertation study group, I was very much engrossed by the notion of "practitioner as inquirer or researcher." The frequently held dichotomy between practice and research did not make sense to me. For over two years I had been experiencing the excitement of living in a world of practice that informed my research, and living in a world of research that informed my practice. These thoughts kept churning away consciously and unconsciously, day and night, until I woke one morning with the image depicted in Figure 4. The springboard had catapaulted me to a formal theory of professional practice.

A FORMAL THEORY OF PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

As Figure 4 illustrates, I visualized the arena of professional practice as the confluence of two interacting dimensions. In one dimension, professionals take action on behalf of their clients and out of this acting comes a state of knowing. The interplay between acting and knowing is dynamic and cyclical as each process informs the other. Depending on the skills and inclinations of the practitioner, this interaction between acting and knowing can remain at an unconscious, fairly rudimentary level, commonly characterized as "trial and error" learning. At the other end of the continuum is Schon's reflective practitioner, who elevates acting-knowing to the level of artistry. Between the two extremes are a host of practitioners who experiment with methods and techniques, share the results of their informal experiments with colleagues, and in the process contribute to and perpetuate the folklore, conventional wisdom or craft knowledge of their profession. In addition to methods and technqiues, this knowledge encompasses procedures, "tips of the trade," "rules of thumb," and "helpful how-to hints." Often operating as tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966), it enables the professional to respond to the demands of practice, but may or may not conform to the theoretical knowledge of the profession.

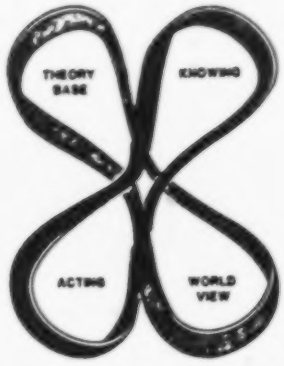

Fig. 4. Theory of Professional Practice
(Piantanida, 1982, p. 151.)

This brings me to the other dimension of professional practice, the world view--theory-base dimension. By world view, I mean the whole constellation of assumptions, beliefs, attitudes and values through which professionals perceive the world and find meaning in their experiences. It is akin to the notion of mythic knowledge described by Garman (1984) in relation to supervision in the field of teacher education:

> Mythic knowledge assumes that as a person decides to become a professional, the role takes on a rich historic and mythic image. For example, we do not learn about teaching in a neutral setting: there are often emotionally charged memories, both pleasurable and painful, stored in the realm of our educational myth. Educational myth is defined here as "an emotional and symbolic expression through language and ritual revealing sacred beliefs about the educational experience, subconscious in nature and often evoked for the purpose of prescribing thought and action about educational practice" [emphasis added]. . . (p. 5)

Each professional brings a unique view of the world to his/her arena of practice, and it is this view which shapes in fundamental ways the professional's capacity to perceive some conditions of practice and ignore others; to decide what constitutes the desired ends of practice, and to forge "appropriate" courses of action. Schon talks about the professional's ability to frame a problem and the way in which the frame simultaneously opens up some avenues of problem resolution and closes down others. The professional's world view often plays a subtle, yet influential role, is this framing process.

The "theory-base" component of the second dimension of professional practice refers to the formal body or bodies of knowledge which distinguish a profession. Generated through a process of disciplined inquiry, this knowledge encompasses not only fully developed theories, but conceptual frameworks, principles, and propositions as well.

Kennedy (1987) in reviewing the literature on the nature of professional expertise discusses four major conceptions of expertise as (a) technical skill; (b) the application of theory or general principles; (c) critical analysis, and (d) deliberate action. "Each succeeding definition," she comments, "remedies failures of earlier definitions, and in so doing each defines expertise as a more complicated phenomenon than did its predecessor. In the end, however, each definition is incomplete in some critical way." (p. 133) I would like to suggest that the formal theory of professional practice proposed above offers a framework within which each conception of expertise is valued as an integral and interactive facet of competent practice. Further, the proposed theory assumes that individuals progress from novice to mature practitioners as they (1) become increasingly aware of the four sources of knowledge, (2) understand the power and limitations of each type of knowledge, and (3) become skillful in blending the dimensions of knowledge within the arena of practice. At the same time, however, it gives rise to a number of implications for research in professions education.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH IN PROFESSIONS EDUCATION

First and foremost, is the need for a systematic examination of the extent to which this formal theory of practice fits within the scholarly tradition of a wide range of professions. The purpose of such an examination would not be to

prove or disprove the theory, but rather to determine whether it offers educators in the professions a useful framework for thinking about the nature of their work. Through this process, alternative conceptualizations of professional practice and professions education could be clarified and serve as a basis for discussion across professions. This past winter, I had the opportunity to participate in the Division I Research Agenda Task Force. In order to gain some insight into issues which Division I members consider to be important, I analyzed the titles of paper proposals submitted to Division I for the 1987 AERA meeting. Based on information in the titles, less than 10% of the 102 proposals went beyond the scope of one particular profession. This leads me to speculate that many members of Division I do not readily link the educational issues germane to one profession to the educational issues germane to all professions. One factor contributing to this situation may be the lack of a common frame of reference. Research such as Schon's (1983, 1987), Kennedy's (1987), and Dinham and Stritter's (1986) help tremendously to evolve such a common frame of reference. But, more research and dialogue is needed.

A second avenue of inquiry is the implications of the formal theory of professional practice for the planning, development, implementation and evaluation of curriculum in professions education. Using the metaphor of closed and open contracts, Garman (1982) contrasts two different theoretical perspectives of curriculum. The closed contract metaphor (with its emphasis on behavioral objectives, predetermined, competency-based learning outcomes, and standardized, quantitative evaluation procedures) tends to yield curricula focused on the acting and theory-based facets of professional's practice. The world view and knowing facets tend to be given minimal attention. In addition, within the closed curriculum metaphor, theoretical knolwedge tends to be viewed in a manner consistent with the rational technical paradigm of practitioner knowledge described by Schon (1983,1987). As a result, the structure and process of the closed curriculum tend to preclude the development of competence in reflection and inquiry which Schon posits as crucial to the artistry of professional practice. Garman's (1982) metaphor of the open curriculum (with its emphasis on making meaning of experience) offers a theoretical framework for designing curricula that encompass all four dimensions of practitioner knowledge as well as enable professionals to cultivate the skills for reflective practice. Research is needed to examine the contributions of both closed and open curricula to the education of professionals who can skillfully integrate the acting--knowing dimension with the world view--theory-base dimension of practice.

A third avenue of inquiry encompasses a host of questions related to the structure and process of professional education curricula. If, for example, a profession values both dimensions of practice, must the dimensions be dealt with sequentially or concurrently in the educational process to create optimal learning? How can educational experiences focusing on each dimension be balanced to help novice practitioners develop steadily and confidently towards maturity? What strategies can be used at the undergraduate, graduate, inservice and continuing education levels to ensure adequate and appropriate attention to each dimension?

A fourth area of inquiry is a twofold examination of modes of learning and instruction. A great deal of writing on learning and instruction has been predicated on the assumptions of the closed curriculum. Over the past quarter century, the whole field of intructional technology has mushroomed, giving designers of closed curricula a wealth of techniques and methods to promote the

acquisition of knowledge and skills. Much less has been written on the techniques and methods that are consistent with and appropriate to the design of open curriculum. Therefore, as research is conducted on the overall contributions of closed and open curricula to the educational preparation of professionals, more research is needed on modes of instruction and learning appropriate to each curriculum tradition. In addition, research is needed on the modes of instruction and learning that are most appropriate for the educating professionals in both dimensions of practice.

Finally, one major concern of educators in the professions is the issue of evaluating and certifying competence. The introduction of behavioral objectives and competency-based education have made possible tremendous strides in the development of equitable, objective and consistent testing procedures. If the essence of competent professional practice entails the synthesis of acting--knowing and world view--theory, then such standardized testing procedures are not sufficient. Research on alternative evaluation methods is needed as well as research on the appropriate balance between objective measures of competencies and evaluation procedures that judge competence.

CONCLUSION

In suggesting these areas for further inquiry, I do not mean to imply that no research on these issues exists. Rather, I want to urge that existing research focusing on specific professions be re-examined and, if possible, reframed within a broader, cross professional context. I am also suggesting that an ongoing dialogue about the nature of professional practice and professional education would help to forge a more cohesive community of scholars within Division I. Over the past few years, at each annual business meeting, I have listened to Division I leaders struggle with the issue of recruiting new members and involving educators from a broader range of professions. As I completed my analysis of Division I paper proposals, I was struck by the following statistics. Approximately 83% of the submissions were related by the subject or the context of the research to the field of health care; approxiately 61% were related to medical education. Do these statistics reflect a driving force within Division I; a force which hinders the formation of a community of scholars interested not only in medical education, but in professions education? One purpose of my paper has been to suggest a theoretical framework for professional practice that might provide a shared point of reference to catalyze fruther research and to facilitate cross professional discussion. Whether my particular theory of professional practice survives or disintegrates in the face of closer scrutiny is not the important issue. What is important, is a spirit of shared inquiry. For me, the idea formulating a research agenda is a metaphor for Division I's quest for and commitment to this spirit of inquiry. I hope this paper has, in some small way, contributed to that quest.

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